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ABSTRACT

A literature review examined the potential impact of a multicultural applicant's nonverbal behavior (specifically, proxemics and kinesics) in a selection interview. Proxemics refers to the perception and use of personal and interpersonal space, which varies from culture to culture. The review indicated that in an interview situation, the chairs should be able to be moved, with the optimum distance about three to four feet between interviewer and interviewee and the exact distance being that most appropriate to the background of the person being interviewed. Kinesics refers to the pattern of body movement in human interaction, or "body language," which incorporates nonverbal behavior such as body position, body orientation, facial expression, gesture, and posture. Across cultures, distinct differences occur in postural demands during interaction. For example, in certain cultures, bowing before elders rather than shaking hands conveys respect while in other cultures, sitting at the elders' feet conveys respect. Because most new applicants to the workforce in the next decade will be either female or members of minority groups, employers can respond more effectively to the cultural values and do a better job of attracting, hiring, and retaining workers by understanding the influence of culture on the work force (Contains 34 references) (KC)

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BARRIERS OF PROXEMICS AND KINESICS FACED BY MANAGEMENT WITH AN APPLICANT FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE DURING A SELECTION INTERVIEW

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Abstract

This research paper examines the potential impact of a multicultural applicant's nonverbal behavior, namely, proxemics and kinesics, in a selection interview. Divided into two sections, the first addresses culture and proxemics, personal space (fixed, semifixed, and nonfixed features). The second section addresses culture and kinesics, and explains how kinesics can be a barrier in a selection interview. In conclusion, this paper suggests that by understanding the influence of culture on the workforce, employers can respond more effectively to the cultural values and do a better job of attracting, hiring and retaining workers.

BARRIERS OF PROXEMICS AND KINESICS FACED BY MANAGEMENT WITH AN APPLICANT FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE DURING A SELECTION INTERVIEW

Introduction

For hundreds of years, the United States (U.S.) welcomed people of different cultural, ethnic, and racial origins with open arms. Many of these people migrated to the U.S. with hopes of realizing "The American Dream." Others sought the U.S. as a refuge from their oppressed countries, resulting in the formation of a multicultural society. Presently everyone feels the impact of cultural differences in today's multicultural society. Management professionals have realized the extent of cultural differences and its role in shaping people, as rapidly growing number of applicants from different cultures seek a career. Thus, today's managers face the task of interviewing applicants from different cultures, with diverse customs, values, and views.

A hiring interview forms the most widely accepted procedure in an employee selection procedure (Guion, 1976, as cited in Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988). Performance in an interview often determines whether or not an individual is selected for a particular job (Rasmussen, 1984). Rasmussen (1984) also suggested that an applicant's nonverbal behavior impacts the interviewers' decision. Though results of few studies (Stewart & Cash, 1991) have shown that success in a selection interview strongly depends on the applicant's verbal responses, and that nonverbal behavior plays a more minor role, one should not (and cannot) ignore this aspect of the interview.

This research paper undertakes to examine the potential impact of a multicultural applicant's nonverbal behavior in a selection interview. It is divided into two sections, the first addressing proxemics and the second addressing kinesics. Both sections define relevant terms, articulate cultural differences and identify potential problems due to multicultural differences between an applicant and an interviewer.

Culture and proxemics

Culture is defined variously by researchers for the benefit of their work. However, the most accepted and frequently cited definition is that of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1960, p.66) which identifies elements such as "patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior required and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups and ideas and their attached values." An important extension of the same definition paved the way for further cross-cultural psychological research, it said "culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life."

Study of proxemics refers to the perception and use of personal and interpersonal space. Hall (1966, p.2), a renowned theorist in the study of proxemics, defined the term as "the study of man's transactions as he perceives and uses intimate (0-18 in.), personal (11/2 -4 ft.), social (4-12 ft.), and public space (12 ft. or more) in various settings." In Hall's view, different kinds of spatial behavior are involuntary influences of man's

cultural paradigms. The cultural paradigms and people are interrelated, a configuration in which people and their environments each mutually influence the other.

Hall (as cited in Kennedy & Everest, 1991) classified various cultures as either high and low-context cultures. In a high-context culture, one rarely communicates information about procedure. In a low-context culture, information abounds, procedures are explicitly explained, and expectations are frequently discussed. According to Hall, although no culture exists on exclusively one end of the context scale, some cultures such as Asian, Hispanic, and African-American are high-context, while others such as North Europeans, are low-context, as seen below in Fig.1.

LOW	MEDIUM-LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
Northern European	Anglo-American male	Southern European	Asian
Swiss	Anglo-American female	Middle Eastern	American Indian
			Hispanic
			African American

Fig.1. Cultures may be placed on a continuum of low to high context, based on the relative importance of nonverbal communication (Kennedy & Everest, 1991).

For the past two hundred years, the individuals who migrated to the U.S. were primarily from low-context cultures, such as European cultures. In the last twenty-five years, this pattern changed; today's immigrants are more diverse and many come from high-context cultures, e.g., nurses from Philippines, scientists and engineers from Asia.

Whenever two people of different cultures interact, each uses his/her own culture's criteria to interpret the relationship, the activity, or the emotions involved. Thus, the study of culture in the proxemic sense should involve the study of people's use of their perceptual apparatus in different emotional states, during different activities, and in different relationships, settings and contexts (Hall, 1974).

Barrier of proxemics in a selection interview

Language, class and culture can interact to create problems in communication between a job applicant and the interviewer, especially in the area of nonverbal behavior. Raised in an Anglo society, interviewers may assume that certain behaviors are universal and convey the same meaning (Sue & Sue, 1977) to all cultural communicators. Such an assumption could be made regarding the use of personal space.

For effective interviewing to take place, the interviewer and the applicant must have the knowledge and ability to send and receive messages appropriately, both verbally

and nonverbally. The probabality of a breakdown in communication increases among people of different ethnic backgrounds, since various cultures dictate different distances in personal space. This section of the present paper discusses the barrier of proxemics with reference to personal space and fixed, semifixed, and non-fixed features, in relation to its effects in an interview setting.

Personal Space. Hayduk (1978) defined personal space as the area around an individual into which others cannot intrude, without causing discomfort. Research by Rogers, Rearden & Hillner (1981) showed that personal distance and intimacy of the topic adversely affected verbal productivity. Argyle & Dean (1965) stated that "people locate themselves at distances which bring into equilibrium the combinations of smiling, eye contact, and intimacy of topic." Generally, most research in the field of proxemics uses personal distance as an independent variable (Evans & Howard, 1973; Hayduck, 1978). Generally using Hall's scheme (1966) where personal distance is two and a half to four feet; social distance is four to seven feet; public distance is seven to twelve feet. Stone & Morden (1976), conducted research in which female undergraduates were interviewed for a time of fifteen minutes. Findings concluded that people talked more about personal matters at the intermediate distance of five feet. Any change in this optimal personal space produced disequilibrium, which disrupted communication.

In the Middle East, people stand very close to converse; in Latin America two people of the same sex stand even closer than do North Americans. Africans and

Indonesians converse at a much closer stance than is normally comfortable for Anglos. Hence a Latin American applicant may cause the interviewer to back away. Some groups like the Chinese, have been raised in an environment that actively structures social relationships and patterns of interaction (Sue & Sue, 1977).

Mahoney (1992) conducted a study to examine the problems the Navajo Indians faced during interviews. From their cultural perspective, it might appear aggressive to firmly grip a person's hand putting themselves at a disadvantage during the interview conducted by an Anglo-Saxon. Also, Navajo consider direct eye contact with a person in authority as discourteous, while the Anglo interviewer assumed that the applicant was shy or insecure. Native American culture respects silence, reservation in expressing feelings and nonassertiveness. Interviewers perceived assertive candidates to possess better interpersonal skills than nonassertive or aggressive candidates. To drive home clearly the awkwardness felt by the Native Americans during the interview process, Mahoney suggested that the interviewers shift paradigms and conduct the selection interview based on traditional Navajo values such as respect - a tactful handshake and limited eye contact, harmony: at ease with self and the world; be more intent on listening than talking, and interview setting: in a quiet natural environment.

Fixed, Semifixed, And Non-Fixed Features. Hall (1974) stated that our culture places severe constraints on the ways we use space. He identified three major types of space holding communicative significance in our society: (a) Fixed-feature space refers to the

characteristic arrangement of rooms by function. (b) Furniture, accessories, screens, or any movable objects within a particular room are called semifixed feature space. These semifixed features should be arranged in a way so as to encourage face-to-face participation, known as sociopetal arrangement or arranged to keep people apart and promote withdrawal (sociofugal arrangement). The manner in which the office furniture is arranged, where the seats are located, and where the applicant is seated has implication that may enhance or retard the communication (Mehrabian & Diamond, 1971). The most important communicative function of semi-fixed feature space is the degree to which it promotes involvement or withdrawal among the individuals who are using the space (Leathers, 1992). Furniture should be arranged in such a way that some variation in the distance might make different applicants comfortable. There should be no barriers as tables or plants between the interviewer and applicant. Importance should be given to the chairs occupied by both participants. Research indicates that they should be placed three to four feet apart (Hall, 1974). The exact distance between the two chairs should depend on the culture of the applicant. (c) Non-fixed feature space is the area immediately surrounding our body that each perceives to be their own. Leathers (1992) posited that perceptions and definitions of space tend to be culture-specific.

Thus, it helps the interviewer to know the applicant's background and to be sensitive for clues of discomfort that might result from proxemics in a selection interview. To reduce this barrier, interviewers will need to see the world from a broader perspective

and change their norm from doing things the American way to doing things the most appropriate way, given the background of the other person in the interaction.

Culture and kinesics

Culture and communication are inseparable since one learns and maintains culture through human interaction (Samovar & Porter, 1994, p.229). Communication consists of verbal and nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is comprised of three interacting systems: visual, auditory, and invisible communication systems. The visual communication system in turn involves three important subsystems, kinesics, proxemics, and artifactual communication. The study of kinesics refers to the pattern of body movement in human interaction (Birdwhistell, 1970). "Body language" (a popular term for kinesics) incorporates nonverbal behavior such as body position, body orientation, facial expression, gesture, posture, etcetera.

An individual's kinesic patterns such as walking and gesturing reult from a dynamic combination of culture and personality. According to Birdwhistell (1970), culture decides "body language," and each gesture or body movement suggests different meanings in differing cultures. In his early work, Birdwhistell argued that body language may be similar to "spoken language." The manner in which a person walks, stands, and sits, speaks in itself. Most kinesic behavior occurs in tune with the total context of speech at any one moment of utterance.

Across cultures, one notices distinct differences in postural demands during

interaction. For example in certain cultures, bowing before elders rather than shaking hands conveys respect while in other cultures, sitting at the elders feet, conveys respect. Similarly Italians use broad, extended, full-arm gestures to talk while the Jews use movements closer to the body. Interpreting kinesic communication behaviors can result in serious misunderstandings.

Additional cultural differences include the following: In many Hispanic cultures, pointing with an index finger conveys rudeness. To say goodbye, North Americans place the right palm downwards moving the palm from side to side. In India, West Africa, and Central America, such a gesture implies beckoning. The folding of arms, body orientation, eye contact, walking and sitting in others' presence signifies distinct cultural kinesic behavior. In Indonesia, a person converses sitting on the floor, however with great care taken not to point the soles of one's feet or shoes toward the other, which would be considered offensive. Anglo-Americans rely heavily on eye contact as an indicator of a person's attentiveness or distractions, while in the African-American culture just close proximity conveys attentiveness. Greetings also take an apparently wide variety of forms in different societies.

Cultures also vary in mere use of restrained facial expressions. In Japan, an ideal face looks controlled, expressionless, and laughter or smiling are used to conceal anger or grief. Matsumoto & Kudoh (1987) found that the Japanese attached the highest priority to being perceived as powerful, while Americans attached the highest priority to being

perceived as likeable.

Therefore, while communicating across cultures, one should understand and observe the other culture's kinesics (Dodd, 1991). Although it should be noted that certain aspects of body communication mean the same in all cultures, either because of their innateness, or as a result of universal human experiences, nonetheless, the major of kinesic symbols have meanings that vary across cultures.

Barrier of kinesics in a selection interview

Communicating interculturally involves not only the understanding of words, but the understanding nonverbal signs such as gestures, spatial relations, and touch. An Anglo interviewer may assume that nonverbal behaviors are universal and convey the same meaning to everyone (Sue & Sue, 1977) ignoring cultural differences inherent in use and interpretation of nonverbal symbols.

Communication breakdowns may occur when people of different ethnic backgrounds employ positions, postures, and expressions, which convey such breakdowns can lead to cultural differences. "Access discrimination," a term used to describe bias related to race and/or gender that influences hiring decisions.

For example, how do Asian beliefs, such as honor and privilege relate to assertiveness, a quality valued for many professional jobs in the U.S.? People who use many words, gestures and loud voice signify assertiveness. What about women who during the interview send a nonassertive signal by sitting with their hands in their lap?

Kennedy & Everest (1991) stated that Anglo-American females and some culturally diverse people possess similar communication characteristics that separate them from Anglo-American males. Most of the people entering the U.S. workforce come from high-context cultures, yet most members of management come from low-context cultures. By creating a bias-free interview process to accommodate all potential workers, employers can discover a wealth of qualified candidates from every cultural background.

Conclusion

American ethnic minorities constitute a growing part of the marketplace - approximately 19 percent (Smith & Vasquez, 1985). Projections of the U.S. population into the twenty-first century indicate that people of color will experience a substantial rate of growth, while the white population will significantly decline (Lee & Richardson, 1991). According to Kennedy and Everest (1991), by the end of this decade only 15 percent of new employees will consist of Anglo-American males and the remaining 85 percent will comprise of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and women. To remain competitive, employers will have to embrace diversity, and develop interview methods that will help them cope with the situation.

With the increasing number of people migrating to this country for jobs, management professionals would do well to train interviewers to handle such diverse applicants. Diversity should form a part of training, and it needs incorporation into organizational policies and procedures (Laabs, 1993). Increasing numbers of

professionals recognize the need to consider an applicant's cultural background and traditions. Diversity of race, gender, marital status floods the American workplace, and managers are looking for ways to handle the varied expectations, abilities and needs of the increasingly heterogeneous workforce. As this country enters the twenty-first century, a new professional must emerge, one who possesses a solid knowledge base with which to meet the challenges of interacting with culturally diverse applicants. A successful manager needs to develop cultural sensitivity to avoid overlooking a qualified candidate.

By understanding the influence of culture on the workforce, employers can respond more effectively to the cultural values and do a better job of attracting, hiring and retaining workers. Conventional job-search wisdom states "it's not always the most qualified person who gets the job, but the one who's most adept at the hunting game" (Mahoney, 1992). When that is the case, the culturally diverse applicant will probably not get selected due to his/her culturally inappropriate nonverbal communication. Therefore, a well-trained interviewer would ask: "am I valuing and assessing each person as a unique individual?"

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